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ABSTRACT

In order to inform policy and programs, research on child abuse must be not only methodologically rigorous, but also practically feasible. However, practical problems make child abuse research difficult to conduct. Definitions of abuse must be explicit and different types of abuse must be assessed separately. Study samples should be as representative as possible of the universe of abused children. Comparison groups of nonabused children are necessary to determine whether the effects of abuse are independent of other factors known to influence child development. These groups should be similar in life experiences and circumstances to the abused groups. Considerable attention must be given to methods for increasing response rates. Maintaining study samples over time requires diligence. These problems are by no means the only ones likely to arise, but they are common to many studies. Access to officially reported cases requires the cooperation of protective service agencies. Thus, research objectives must fit overall agency goals and findings must be useful for policy and program development. Investigators must provide cooperating agencies with reports of study findings. Although research will not solve the problem of child abuse, high caliber research is needed to build a knowledge base about the causes, correlates, and consequences of abuse that will ultimately lead to solutions. (ABL)

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METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS
IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON ABUSED CHILDREN

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METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON ABUSED CHILDREN

Conducting research on sensitive subjects such as child abuse presents unique methodological and practical problems. Although child abuse research has become more methodologically sophisticated over time, it continues to be plagued with common design flaws that may compromise study findings (Leventhal, 1981, 1982; Widom, 1987). However, these flaws may be due to practical problems encountered during implementation rather than to any lack of knowledge about methodological principles. This paper addresses five of these problems: 1) definitions of abuse; 2) source of study populations; 3) source of comparison groups; 4) subject recruitment; and 5) subject retention in longitudinal research.

Definitions of Abuse

Definitions of abuse generally classify abuse into three types: 1) physical abuse; 2) neglect; and 3) sexual abuse. Emotional abuse constitutes a fourth type, but it is the most difficult to define and the least likely to be reported. Moreover, it could be argued that some element of emotional abuse is a component of all other forms of abuse. Operational definitions of abuse must be as concrete and specific as possible to facilitate comparisons across studies. Definitions conforming to reportable conditions are likely to be the most relevant with respect to policy and programs. It is critical to stratify samples by type of abuse to understand whether different types of abuse have different effects.

The classification of multiple forms of abuse remains a thorny issue in child abuse research. Although researchers prefer to deal with variables that can be easily and neatly categorized, abuse rarely exists in the pure forms desirable for research. A child may experience more than one form of abuse in

a given abuse incident or may experience different forms of abuse at different times. If a child is physically injured as a result of sexual abuse, should that child be classified as both physically and sexually abused or as sexually abused only? If a child has a recent report of neglect, but has previous reports for physical abuse, should type of abuse be classified as neglect only or as both physical abuse and neglect? When multiple forms of abuse occur, whether or not they occur concomitantly, how can the investigator determine whether observed outcomes are the result of the most recent type of abuse or the cumulative effects of all types?

To further complicate the picture, the type of abuse reported and substantiated may not always reflect all forms of abuse experienced by the child. For example, a child may have experienced sexual abuse, but there may be insufficient evidence to substantiate a report of sexual abuse. If the child has also been neglected, then the report may be classified as neglect in order to gain entree into the service delivery system for the child and family. Thus, sole reliance on the reported type of abuse may lead to misclassifying type of abuse for research purposes.

Stratifying samples by type of abuse requires sufficiently large subgroups to carry out analyses by type of abuse. Ideally, studies would include subgroups representing all possible combinations of abuse. However, some combinations are relatively rare, making it difficult to obtain the sample size necessary to conduct appropriate analyses. Multiple forms of abuse could be classified according to the most serious form, but this solution still does not distinguish between single and multiple forms of abuse. Widom's prospective study of the relationship between childhood abuse and adolescent delinquency indicated different outcomes for children who had

experienced sexual abuse only or sexual abuse plus other forms of abuse (Widom, 1988).

In the optimal study design, the consequences of abuse are assessed at a given time interval following the abuse incident. However, some children may live in a continually abusive environment, while others may experience only one incident of brief duration. Thus, it may be difficult to determine whether the observed sequelae of abuse are actually due to abuse rather than to other elements of the child's environment. Investigators must distinguish between repetitive abuse over time and isolated incidents of abuse.

Sources of Study Populations

Research on abused children often uses samples of convenience, such as clinic or hospital patients or recipients of special intervention services. However, these samples are biased to the extent that they are not representative of the universe of abused children. Subjects drawn from hospital settings, especially emergency rooms, are likely to have more severe injuries. Moreover, younger children are likely to be overrepresented among cases of severe injuries. If study samples are limited to recipients of special intervention services, then assessments of the consequences of abuse are likely to be confounded with the effects of treatment. Such groups may also be biased toward cases receptive to treatment, particularly if participation in treatment programs is voluntary.

Officially reported cases of abuse constitute the most reasonable approximation of the universe of abused children. Moreover, they are the most relevant with respect to policy and programs. Thus, samples drawn from cases reported to state protective service agencies offer the best opportunity for understanding the impact of abuse on children. However, access to the

populations served by such agencies is often extraordinarily difficult to achieve.

Samples of reported cases should be limited to those where the report is substantiated. It must be noted that the distinction between substantiated and unsubstantiated reports does not necessarily signify the presence or absence of abuse. Some abuse reports may be unsubstantiated because of limited resources in providing services, particularly if the abuse is not severe or appears to be an isolated incident. Thus, even samples of substantiated cases may be biased toward more severe or chronic abuse. Reported cases are also likely to overrepresent low socioeconomic families because of biases in recognizing and reporting abuse.

Source of Comparison Groups

Comparison groups of nonabused children should be selected in such a way as to maximize similarities in life experiences and circumstances considered to influence child development. Unless abused and nonabused groups are similar except for abuse, group differences cannot reasonably be attributed to abuse. Although there can never be absolute certainty that comparison groups have not experienced abuse, it is essential to determine that they have not been reported for abuse. But this determination requires access to central reporting registries. Many central registries maintain reports of abuse for limited periods of time. Thus, it may be possible to determine whether a comparison family was reported for abuse in the recent past, but not in the more distant past. Inevitably, comparison groups are likely to include some abusing families who have never been reported.

The selection of appropriate comparison groups usually involves matching on relevant variables. Any lack of correspondence between abused and

nonabused groups on these variables may affect the validity of the findings. In prospective studies where the characteristics of abused subjects are unknown prior to enrollment, matching must be done on an individual basis because there is no other way to choose comparison subjects simultaneously with the selection of abused subjects. Comparison groups must be selected from sources with access to the information necessary for matching. If abused subjects are selected from reported cases of abuse, then what constitutes a reasonable source for comparison subjects? Access to community populations of school children is no longer simple or guaranteed. Any specialized groups may not include sufficient diversity to yield appropriate matches.

At what point in time should the matching criteria be satisfied: at the time of the abuse incident or at the time of assessment for the study. If the assessment is conducted at a given time period after the index abuse incident, then the status of the abused child with respect to some of the matching criteria may have changed. For example, an abused child may be living in a single-parent family at the time of abuse, but in a two-parent family at the time of the study. Should that child be matched with a nonabused child in a single- or two-parent family? An abused child may be living with his natural parents at the time of abuse, but with foster parents at the time of the study. Should that child be matched with a nonabused child living with natural or foster parents? If the intent of matching is to equalize the environmental risk of abuse between the abused and nonabused groups, then the status of the child at the time of abuse would seem the logical choice. Furthermore, a recent change in status (except for the change itself) may not yet have influenced the child's development to the same extent as the previous status.

If place of residence, such as neighborhood, is used as a matching criterion, then it is important to match on this variable at the time of the abuse incident, particularly if the abuse occurred in the child's home. Garbarino (Garbarino, 1980; Garbarino and Sherman, 1980) demonstrated that geographical areas could be characterized as having high or low risk for maltreatment. Selecting abused and nonabused groups from areas with comparable risks for maltreatment may lead to a better understanding of why some children in high risk environments are abused while others are not. However, calculating rates of maltreatment for geographical areas requires classifying abuse reports by street address which may be beyond the resources of most studies.

The use of foster care as an intervention for abused children suggests that foster care may be an important matching variable. Experiencing out-of-home placements may have considerable influence, either positive or negative, on children's development. Ideally, abused children in foster care would be matched with nonabused children in foster care for reasons other than abuse. However, abused children are often in foster care for varying periods of time. Placements do not always occur immediately following an abuse incident. Thus, abused children may be placed in foster care after their matching nonabused counterparts have already been selected. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the number of children in foster care for reasons other than abuse is large enough to serve as a pool of potential matches on foster care status.

Subject Recruitment

Special procedures may be necessary to recruit subjects for studies on child abuse. After experiencing investigations of abuse allegations, abusing families may resent any further intrusions from outside sources. They may

fear that researchers will ask probing questions about abuse. Parents may fear that children will disclose information about abuse that was withheld from investigators. If an abused child had extensive evaluations following an abuse report, parents or guardians may not want the child to undergo any further assessments. The abused child may be so traumatized by the experience of abuse that parents do not want the child subjected to research procedures.

Investigators must decide whether to inform potential study participants that the research concerns child abuse. If comparison group families are informed that the study focuses on abuse, they may conclude that they are suspected of abuse despite assurances to the contrary. Some researchers argue that full disclosure about selection criteria in research involving sensitive topics can be considered unethical (Kinard, 1985). Decisions about the presentation of the study to potential participants should be based on ways to best protect participants rather than ways to make the study easier to conduct.

Monetary incentives are necessary for recruiting families into studies concerning abuse. Nonetheless, even monetary incentives are not likely to raise response rates to desirable levels. Given the likelihood of low response rates, it is crucial that the study population be sufficiently large to yield the desired sample size after taking into account a low response rate. Thus, if a sample size of 100 is needed and the response rate is 30%, an eligible population of 333 is necessary. Obtaining such large populations is difficult even when using reported cases. Furthermore, response rates are likely to vary by type of abuse, with the lowest rates for sexual abuse. The need for large eligible populations may increase the length of time needed for subject recruitment which in turn raises the costs of research.

Subject Retention in Longitudinal Research

Given the frequency with which many abusing families move, retaining these families in longitudinal studies poses a challenge. Decisions about the length of time between assessments in longitudinal studies must take into account the likelihood of poor retention rates. Sample sizes must be large enough to withstand the loss of subjects over time.

Locating abusing families for follow-up assessments requires considerable perseverance. Children may move from their parents' home to foster homes to relatives' homes and back to their parents' home. Telephone numbers are often unlisted. If a child is placed out of the home at follow-up, then who can authorize the child's continued participation in the study -- the foster parent or the natural parent? Children whose parents are divorced may be in the custody of one parent at the beginning of the study and in the custody of the other parent at the time of follow-up. If permission was obtained from the first parent at Time 1, then is it necessary to obtain permission from the second parent at Time 2? If the second parent refuses permission, then the child is lost to the study in terms of longitudinal data. If both parent and child are interviewed for longitudinal research and the parent consents but the child refuses, then should the parent be followed over time even though the child is not? Should the child be asked to participate at a later time in case he or she might then consent? Should parents be informed if their child refuses to participate? In abusing families, parental knowledge of a child's refusal may increase the risk of abuse to the child.

Tracking respondents over time requires determination, detective work, and frequent contact by letter or telephone. Asking for address updates and offering incentives for compliance may help in retaining respondents.

Obtaining the name, address, and telephone number of a contact person who usually knows the respondent's whereabouts is also likely to reduce attrition.

The issue of retention applies not only to study participants but also to project staff. Reviewing case records of abuse or interviewing abused children and their parents is emotionally draining and difficult work. Investigators should establish a forum for providing support to project staff in order to avoid burnout.

Summary

In order to inform policy and programs, research on child abuse must be not only methodologically rigorous, but also practically feasible. However, practical problems in implementing even well-designed studies make child abuse research difficult to conduct. Investigators must be aware of potential pitfalls and build in mechanisms for minimizing these problems. In particular, definitions of abuse must be explicit and different types of abuse must be assessed separately. Study samples should be as representative as possible of the universe of abused children. Comparison groups of nonabused children are necessary to determine whether the effects of abuse are independent of other factors known to influence child development. These groups should be similar in life experiences and circumstances to the abused groups. Since subject recruitment is likely to prove difficult, considerable attention must be given to methods for increasing response rates. Maintaining study samples over time requires diligence and perseverance. These problems are by no means the only ones likely to arise, but they are common to many studies.

Access to the most appropriate populations, that is, officially reported cases, requires the cooperation of protective service agencies. Thus,

research objectives must fit overall agency goals and findings must be useful for policy and program development. Investigators must provide cooperating agencies with reports of study findings. Although research will not solve the problem of child abuse, high calibre research is needed to build a knowledge base about the causes, correlates, and consequences of abuse that will ultimately lead to solutions.

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